

A NEW WORLD

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“Science and technology have been developing steadily in the past century. How about the human mind – are we finally approaching full awareness and consciousness?”

Right after hearing this sentence, Yassine yawned as he looked at his watch hoping that the boring philosophy class would end. He wanted to get ready to watch the football match. He had been waiting for it over a long period.

To a casual observer it may have looked as if Yassine didn't like philosophy or even school. This is because he admired and appeared obsessed with a sport that is widely popular in this country. He always knew which team played when and with whom. But he was, in fact, doing well in his studies. He had managed to finish the first semester very well. He was among the best three in his class, which clearly made him a candidate to graduate from high school in the next two years with a good grade that would provide him a promising future.

Yassine was living his normal teenage years surrounded by a limited circle of friends. He was having a kind of a “rare” relationship nowadays, with his old grandpa. In fact, Yassine was practicing philosophy without realizing it, as they got into conversations and discussions, even sometimes heated debates. He actually enjoyed these moments. It was one of the main reasons that drove him

to thrive each time he headed to that red door, holding a basket of cakes and delicious traditional bread-like pieces to a man who decided to live his last days in a partial loneliness.

So what was actually different at school? Was it because of the absence of interactions with the Professor who did nothing but gave assignments and used hard words to communicate? Or was it because of him taking time to discuss the structure of an argumentative text more than the ideas it contains? Or maybe, it was the eternal disputes he was having with disorderly students? Or could it be just simple as putting a philosophy course at the end of the day when everyone is tired?

People live and then they die as life continues. Yassine was aware of this truth as his old grandfather passed away, even though he wasn't able to hold his sadness and sorrow for losing such a person. A wise man said, "People die when they are forgotten." Indeed this was the case since he can't imagine ever forgetting the man who took him out of an endless dark whirlpool where many people are still stuck even today. And what greater honor would it be than dedicating his life to do the same?

It is 7:00 am. This means that there is a train to catch up as backing out could not be a choice. It is still hard to pass through that half-awake transit state. After all these years, waking up doesn't become easier.

It is a rainy day. Yassine or "Dr. Yassine," as some people called him, waved for a taxi.

Yassine stood at the front door of the station recalling the same view he saw 10 days earlier. It was a very short vacation, or kind of. Now he needs to go back for work. The class is waiting for him. Some 8 years ago he would have been excited to work again, to do what he loves to do, and to go for what he chose to dedicate himself to someday. At that time, he was convinced that he's at the right position to act, when he became a philosophy teacher. For him, it wasn't an easy mission, and results weren't satisfying, as he struggled to get the attention of the students to the importance of what he was saying.

Was it because the lack of good teaching skills? He was quite convinced in his methods. However, he continued with the same energy, driven by his ambitions, and maybe by some of the few brilliant students he encountered from time to time. Unfortunately, this energy was wearing off, social media invaded the world more than ever, and he was finding himself spending more than a quarter of an hour asking students to put their phones aside. Until one day, when he found two of his students watching a football match during the class. That picture showed him a normal act for him at a certain age. But things are totally different.

And now, he's heading back to class, with no ambition or excitement, to perform what have become nothing more than a 'job'.

The train left the station, as Yassine started to scroll his phone looking for at least one article to read before falling asleep. He stopped suddenly when he saw a well-known symbol of a zoom in-eye: "Illuminati."

The word brought nightmares into Yassine's earlier life. Alongside one of his best few friends, the two struggled from the heaviness of the 'information' they carried; information that was on the Internet,

uploaded by a guy who happened to possess all the undeniable truth about this world. Yassine was actually terrified. He became obsessed with ideas such as ‘the end is near’, ‘everything is planned by them.’ It was like falling into a swamp, where mud would drag you down every time you walked more into that swamp and when getting out it was harder.

Unlike some other memories of his life, Yassine did not have the vibes of shame or cringe. He was aware of the situation and was fully convinced of the outcome. The huge load of information he was receiving made due to the increase in availability of internet connection and in absence of a critical thinking methodology had shone light on what might happen.

Yassine started to lose hope. It is in moments like these in our lives, when the person needs a ‘guide’. It may be an excerpt from a book or a movie scene. It might perhaps be a daily life situation that changes our perspective. Whatever it is, the influence might be way more effective, when that ‘guide’ is a person, a close person, and when only interaction can be sufficient to overcome hard times. In the case of Yassine, that guide was his grandfather.

In popular culture, the grandfather is basically conceived as a symbol of the family’s unity. His presence is the essence of family reunions during celebrations and special occasions. Otherwise, he is considered a person who only needs physical care to be provided, while he can only communicate to people of his age, mainly neighbors, or old time friends if there are still any. This absence of interaction with older people seems like a ‘generational break-up’, which is kind of natural, as the majority of grandfathers, weren’t well educated, the reason behind this difficult contact. Yassine was lucky. His old man was that wise person that listens very well, responds gently, often with a smile on his face.

It is true that in his early days of Conspiracy's fantasy, Yassine was disappointed by his 'brainwashed' grandfather, after the latter showed less interest to his huge discoveries. However, as his vision shifts from his phone to the train's window, he can't forget how impactful his words were, how for an old man that happened to encountered and even befriended some of intellectual and cultured people during his days as a Café's waiter, to bring him out of the mess, and help him find a proper way of thinking in life.

"You see, Yassine, everything can be convincing. It's all about the way you choose to represent it. This is how people build lives, and this is how people lose lives too. When you're convinced, it is either mind or emotion. So you mustn't go blind after your emotions. You should make sure to build a strong mind that does not take things for granted. Think, ask questions, and try to find answers: build your own knowledge."

On the blackboard, he wrote:

What is truth? How can we reach it?

Prepare this for the next class. See you next time.

Pr. Yassine wrote these words on the board. This used to be his favorite problematic to start a 2 hour discussion trying to involve students to participate and express their opinions. But today, it's homework for them. Pr. Yassine will collect the essays, correct them, and prepare students for the final exam.

After a long day, he headed to his apartment, where he chose to live in partial loneliness. At the balcony, he carried his guitar and played a smooth piece that fitted a calm and starry night. It seems like he hasn't lost all of his passion after all.

On December 31st 2019, the municipal health commission of Wuhan in China reported dozens of cases of pneumonia due to an unknown cause. Days later, the responsible agent was determined. It was a new virus that was referred to afterwards as COVID-19. Things started to develop quickly and significantly. The World Health Organization announced that COVID-19 had become a pandemic due to the alarming levels of its spread and severity of sickness. This turning point put the whole world in shock, fear, confusion, stress. There was a mix of almost all varieties of emotions between those who didn't manage to express their true feelings and those who chose several strategies to hide their stress. Everyone was asking, "How did we get here? What is going to happen next? Is this it? What and why?"

And then there were no one in airports, in parks, in malls, on the streets. The whole world went through quarantine. It was a sight that brought chills, the same way Yassine felt when he was heading back home after he bought some foodstuff. He heard no car noises and no street vendors' voices. Nothing but silence reigned. He sat at the balcony in the evening to feel that silence again, before it was interrupted by a phone call.

"Hello Mum, how you doing?"

"Yassine my boy, how is it going there dear? Is everything okay?"

"Good! How's father doing, Zineb and Hamza?"

"Everything's fine for the moment. Your father was wondering why you didn't join us before the lockdown. I thought the same."

"It wasn't an option. Everything came suddenly before I finished some work. I'll definitely join you as soon as possible."

"At least you can go and stay with your cousins Mourad and Zakaria?"

"It's okay Mum. I feel good where I am right now."

"You're going to stay alone for God only knows how, and especially in moments like these?"

"There's no need to worry. I'm going to be totally fine."

“You really remind me of him, you know?”

“You know better.”

“Love you, stay safe, bye!”

“I love you too Mum!”

The “quarantine era” felt indeed as a long stretched period. Some countries chose to minimize restrictions, while others denounced completely the state of emergency. Cities, roads and streets felt alive again, and all sights shifted to the newest hot topic: vaccines. The vaccination operation had been initiated in several countries. Soon after, the vaccine became controversial. It was the topic. The uncut war of words started up everywhere on social media. The anti-vaccination movement has been spreading faster than the virus itself, linking vaccines with some deep master-plans that aimed at reducing world’s overpopulation density or to control people’s lives with tiny microchips. For many, it was indeed all part of a conspiracy.

Yassine was surrounded by debates everywhere: in the news, social media, at the market, the streets, even the school. Today, Pr. Yassine received questions from his students about the vaccine. He felt that their questions were more driven by a curiosity to know his opinion more than seeking information. However, he responded:

“Actually, you should ask the biology Professor. She will be a better choice to explain and answer all of your questions.”

But before the students collected their stuff, he interrupted:

“Everything can be convincing.”

(Silence)

“Next time, you’re holding your phone, or you’re talking to someone, and you receive new information, try to ask questions. Is it presented as a fact? If it’s a fact, ask for evidence then. If it’s a conclusion, ask more questions: Why? How? What if? Because

facts aren't every statement that follows 'scientists found that...' and theories and conclusions aren't every argumentation that involves 'logic'. Let's take an example..."

As soon as Pr. Yassine started to explain the example, and the students were listening, he felt surrounded by a different atmosphere. And on his way back home, the feeling kept with him. He was well aware of what happened, but he was convinced that it's not enough to take that kind of a decision.

All roads lead to Rome. By pulling all strings together, we can see the full picture. Titles that covered articles and videos all around the web, good-looking well-talking persons who claimed their eligibility were raising the heat of the debate by throwing shots at those who were hiding in the shadows and, planning and trying to decide their fates. People were and will always be having grudge for governments and billionaires. It is always a belief that those who possess wealth, possess power, and will always thrive to control everything, and of course, the idea of being controlled wasn't a favorite one for people.

Following news hasn't been quite the right thing to do after work for Yassine, even though he had to do it somehow. At least he's not forced as he used to fill his social media accounts with posts sharing his opinions on actualities. It's better for him now to enjoy being a spectator. Or is it? He thought well about that idea, while he remembered his meeting with Zakaria today at 5:00 pm.

At the café, Yassine turned left and right before he caught a big hand waving at him, it was Zakaria with his big smile. The two greeted as they chose a quiet place to talk. And after a half an hour speech, Zakaria asked his guest:

"So, what do you think?"

"Let's understand this. Elders are going to be the first to be vaccinated. There is a small group of intellectuals in your

neighborhood you say, who are likely to convince people to not take the vaccine. Now, a lot of elders, adults and youngsters are refusing to be vaccinated. And you're afraid that your mot... my auntie will become the same."

"Every time I go to visit her, she asks me if it's safe. Maybe being a doctor is a major reason. She trusts me blindly without even understanding my attempts to explain it scientifically. But those little doubts, with my absence and the presence of some of her friends that were completely washed by the ideas of that group, make me nervous. And what about the other people who are also threatened if they continue believing in those conspiracies?"

"I don't think I can change anything. You've tried to talk to them right?"

"Yaaaa... Yeah but, that's not the thing, I'm not you! I've come to you knowing who you are, what are you capable of, and what were your ambitions. For God's sake you were the one to convince the stubborn Brahim to let Soukaina pursue her studies!"

"We will see. Let's hope everything is gonna be good."

Small protestations begin to attract more and more people that even turned up in some places into riots.

This was all what filled the news during that week, after the ending of the first semester. Yassine took this first week of the vacation as a chance to rethink Zakaria's proposition. Recall that situation, that day in school, recalling his first years as a teacher, remembering his words, "People die when they are forgotten." He should never forget. What could he have told him right now?

The rioting groups continued to commit more destruction while protests continued to yell their united slogans. Yassine is riding in a taxi to work. Then the driver crashes into a street light after barely

avoiding two escaping rioters. A burned tire is thrown at the middle of the road, while stones are thrown everywhere.

Seeing the injured driver barely breathing under the chairs, Yassine wondered, "Why?"

In a sudden silence that was maybe due to his temporary hearing loss he asked, "Why?"

He wasn't a rioter, neither an enemy of the rioters, "So, why? Why is he the victim? Why is he laying here waiting for his death?"

He wants to live more. He started losing sight, as he felt his consciousness slowly fading.

Yassine opened his eyes. It's the same dream again. And he didn't know how or why this dream was haunting him all week along. He covered his face with his hands as one tear fell down. It's been very long since the last time he cried. Even if he couldn't relate to it, he felt it was a need.

On an early morning of spring, the classroom felt alive with voices of young students talking and babbling before they sensed a silhouette entering the class. A partial silence reigned, followed by the sound of chalk, as the students looked at the blackboard: *Science and technology have developed throughout the recent century. Can we say the same about the human mind? Are we finally approaching fully aware and conscious societies.*

"Today we're having a free discussion. Shall we begin?"